

[The Pauper's Christmas]

Beliefs and Customs - [?]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 8 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Park No. Bronx

DATE December 6, 1938

SUBJECT The Pauper's Christmas.

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview 1758 Bathgate Ave.
3. Name and address of informant James Poitieres (Keep confidential)
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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Informant lives with two brothers in 4 room apartment of old tenement, surroundings indicate an almost stark poverty with feeble efforts of disguise. Shabby couch, moth-eaten, stained chairs placed carelessly about, but no carpet on floor and a woman's neat touch very obviously lacking.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Pak No. Bronx

DATE

SUBJECT THE PAUPER'S CHRISTMAS (James Poitieres, Inf.

1. Ancestry Father-French, with Italian and J Mother-Born in Germany of Jewish parents.

2. Place and date of birth

Trinity Hospital, New Yor, April 27, 1910

3. Family

Lives in 4 room [?] apartment with two brothers Parents both dead.

4. Places lived in, with dates

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East Bronx

5. Education, with dates

Public school to 7 A

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Printer's assistant

7. Special skills and interests

Likes to watch baseball games and discuss economics

8. Community and religious activities

None

9. Description of informant young man of rather swarthy appearance, black hair, slightly below medium height but solidly built, quiet, generally uncommunicative and almost taciturn but willing to be friendly and adaptable in conversation when the subject interests him.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

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NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 701 Crotona Pk. No. Bronx, N. Y.

DATE

SUBJECT THE PAUPER'S CHRISTMAS.

I've been the one who's really took care of the family since my mother died. John never had no luck with jobs; not that he's lazy or dumb, but nothing ever pans out. No sooner does he hear about a job than he gets sick, or the boss dies. . honest Honest , that guy just never has luck at nothing. Last time he worked was for a hotel downtown. Cleaning up, dirty work, but he didn't mind. He figured at least it would last over the winter. First thing you know, the place changes owners, and he gets the air. I say sometimes it's fate- how else can you explain it? The poor boy [?] worries all the time. There ain't nothing wrong with him, like I say. Maybe what he needs is confidence. He's still trying to win these contests in the papers; it gives him something to do, otherwise he'd go nuts.

The other brother worked on and off; it never amounted to nothing. I might say we never really seen any good days, so maybe that's why we don't complain about depression. Now, at least, you can get Relief [of?] on WPA; something to keep you going. I remember when we lived on Third Avenue, the three of us used to swipe milk bottles - we hadda eat, I don't care what you say.

The old man died when we were kids. We lived over on Tremont Avenue when he was alive, past West Farms, in one of these old two family houes houses . They was ten houses in a row, we used to call them the Ten Commandments. There was a hill near 2 there, Greens's Hill, it slanted way up about 100 feet - well, maybe less - then it was a flat ridge, and we used to build bonfires and pick strawberries there. We put up shacks there like all kids do, and we used to put on little shows. They was usually about pitchers we had seen. Like I remember we played "The Shiek", and all of us got dressed up in sheets.

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There was a movie around there called "The Booth"; I think they use it for some kind of Jewish shows now. Then there was one called "The Pictorium", on 180th Street near Vyse. My mother and me both worked there after my father died.

There's nothing special I can remember about that house near Greens's Hill except the feller who lived upstairs. He used to electrocute cats. I mean just for fun, I mean he didn't kill them, only knock them unconscious for awhile, and their hairs would stand up. To him it was like a pleasure - he got a kick out of it. So far as I know, he wasn't cruel in any other way, but when he was drunk he used to take these cats down the cellar and put this live wire to their backs. They say a cat has nine lives; that's no lie. This feller was about 23, he worked in a coal yard, and naturally he liked to drink. He'd get into scraps with his old man and once the old man hit him in back of the head with a hammer and sent him to the hospital. The old man drank more than he did, and they were always having brawls. That's all I remember about that house, I mean as far as characters is concerned.

After my father died of T. B. we moved over to Washington Avenue. I hadda get out of school, I was in 7A, and I got a job in the Pictorium on account of my mother worked there and the manager knew her. My mother scrubbed floors there and I helped out the operator. I used to wind reels for him; you know, when the reels run out you have to rewind them, that's the kind of work I did at first. I used to get two dollars a week for a couple of hours work. I only got the job because he was sorry for my mother. Afterwards, I worked on Tremont for a butcher for 15 a week, and they cut ny mother's pension down to forty bucks. You know, a funny thing happend when I worked in the theatre. We used to get passes to see the shows, you know. So one night we all go - my mother and us three brothers - and they're giving 3 away prizes; just like Screeno, only it wasn't called that. They was giving away those beaded pocketbooks that night, four of them was going to be given away, beaded pocketbooks was in style. So what do you think happens? Nothing phoney; only just by dumb luck we cop every one of the prizes; the manager was embarrassed, I guess, my mother goes up there four times straight. We sold three of the

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bags, and we kept the last one. That's something that only can happen once in a lifetime, don't you think.

After that our luck ran just the other way. My mother got sick, and couldn't work no more. I was the only one working, and we couldn't pay for a regular doctor so they took her to the hospital. We thought she had a rupture from strain. Then, while she was in the hospital, they stopped the widow's pension, and we couldn't pay the rent. Later, we found out she had cancer, but they didn't tell us nothing till after she died. She died on Christmas Day, and on the same day that we get the telegram telling us she's dead, the landlord hands us a dispossess. And we didn't have no money even to eat. I still think they gave her the "Black bottle" - you know, they figured she wouldn't last long anyway, just a charity case, so they probably figured to save expense. I know that she was shipped from Fordham to St. Ann's Hospital on account of they thought she was a Catholic. What I'd like to know, if she was really so sick, why could they move her from one place to another? So far as I know, you dassent move a sick person. I never had no use for these charity hospitals anyway.

The nurse told me afterwards that she refushed refused to be blessed by either a priest or a rabbi. My mother was Jewish, though you might say that she never was orthodox or went to synagogue or anything. My father was what you call Episca - Episcopalean, I think it's called; I don't know. I've got no use for religion myself; it's all right for them who believe in it and many of my friends are religious . . . but not me.